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Viewing cable 09SOFIA154, SOFIA'S MEAN STREETS

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SOFIA154	2009-04-02 14:03	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Sofia

Appears in these articles:

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R 021403Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA
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SIPDIS

EUR/CE - TOM YEAGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/02/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BU](#)
SUBJECT: SOFIA'S MEAN STREETS

Classified By: Charge Alex Karagiannis for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Sofia's streets are a showcase for potholes and uncollected garbage. Lined by decaying soviet style blocks and uncompleted new construction (mixed with some glitzy modern buildings), they are ugly. While the ordinary crime rate is low, organized crime violence is a recurrent feature as rivals compete for turf and engage in contract killings. This landscape is the visible result of years of pervasive political corruption and the persistent failure in Bulgaria's law enforcement and public administration systems. While the Socialist(BSP) led government tries to convince the public and the EU that it is

seriously fighting crime and corruption, every day the average person sees massive flouting of the law. Gangsters, thugs, and mutri (shady businessmen) in expensive cars show off their ill-gotten wealth. They easily slip through the cumbersome and corrupt justice system (no major OC figure has ever spent significant time in jail). Some young people see mutri as role models: cool, feared, and above the law. A coarsening of society is taking place. Tired and cynical about government institutions and politicians, Bulgarians have come to accept corruption as part of the normal landscape and find it easier to cope with it rather than to change it. This mood will likely dominate as Bulgarians go to the polls this summer. End Summary.

UGLY AND BOORISH

¶2. (SBU) Arriving in Sofia by air, a traveler is unsure if Bulgaria is yet a modern EU country. Airport Terminal 2 is clean, modern, and efficient; Terminal 1 is old, dingy, and cigarette-smoke infused. Once a traveler hits the airport access road and the main thoroughfares, the picture gets starker. Drab, decrepit soviet style blocks rise up, in stark juxtaposition to the Porsche dealership. Crumbling streets with unevenly patched pavement, potholes that can pass for tank traps, and sidewalks crammed with parked cars are routine. Basic infrastructure is mediocre to poor. A years-long garbage mess (no room in landfills) has gotten worse over a contract dispute with the collection companies; refuse is both scattered and piled high. Packs of wild dogs roam widely, even in central residential areas and what passes as the leafy, upscale suburban neighborhoods. What had been a rather green, complacent, modestly architecturally interesting city with a pleasant historic center has become a car-choked, trashy mess.

¶3. (C) Bad as that is, the organized crime situation is ugly as well. Ordinary crime is pretty low, and most citizens feel safe. But crimes directed at and by the bling, shady nouveau riche -- intimidation, extortion, kidnappings -- have become more visible, and those criminals are more arrogant. The raw statistics indicate failure or unwillingness to deal with serious crimes: since 1997, there have been over 130 contract murders, with only a handful of arrests and just five convictions. What previously had been professional killings (both shootings and bombings) with no collateral damage, have now gotten sloppier; in one instance a drive-by machine gun spray failed to do the job outside a popular restaurant, but did terrorize other patrons. One prominent, perhaps shady, lawyer was gunned down just days ago in a provincial capital.

¶4. (SBU) Over the past six months, there have been bombings at so-called gentlemen's clubs -- as organized crime families play out their turf wars. The number of kidnappings of wealthy (and perhaps sleazy) businessmen has gone up; it's a lucrative new racket. Recently, in one very crude, but effective extortion case, one hotel owner received a hand-grenade with the pin removed. Organized criminals and their no-neck, black-leather-clad body guards flaunt and disobey the law; big, black SUVs are the rage, barreling down streets, ignoring traffic and parking regulations. Seeing no force to control them, many ordinary Bulgarians have followed suit, running lights, passing against oncoming city traffic, and the like. Young people find mutri -- cool guys above the law with money and status -- an attractive role model. In a hilarious interview that unwittingly confirms the view that muscle and money are what matter, the new "Miss Bulgaria" spoke openly that she is not some "cheap prostitute" and how her Russian "businessman" boyfriend helps get nice things -- in what is widely considered to have been a rigged selection.

The overall attitude amounts to private gain and social indifference.

PUBLIC SERVICES -- CRIMINAL NEGLECT

15. (C) Sofia's dilapidated condition does not come from a poor economy. National growth has averaged about seven percent for five years. The central government has maintained large fiscal reserves and not spent wisely on basic infrastructure. Meanwhile, corruption siphoned off the nation's wealth to shady businesses, government officials and political parties, imposing a heavy toll on public services. Potholed and poorly lit roads are the norm. Sofia's garbage collection crisis, recalling scenes of Naples, now in its sixth week, is symbolic of an indifferent, sometimes testy relationship between the municipal and central governments as they play a blame game in advance of summer elections. The most vital public services, law and order forces, have gone from bad to worse. Almost a year after the forced resignation of disgraced Interior Minister Petkov, there are few tangible changes at that sprawling, dysfunctional agency.

Things are little better at the newly created State Agency for National Security (DANS). Intended to target high level organized crime and corruption, DANS is instead politicized; some officials have links to criminals and shady businesses.

16. (C) Meanwhile, old scandals fester and new ones emerge. The line-up is extensive; a short list of the most prominent case includes Sofia's heating utility; Sofia's garbage service; the state Road Infrastructure Fund; misuse of multiple EU SAPARD and PHARE funds; multiple agricultural and environmental programs; numerous dubious land swaps; the National Revenue Agency; and the Customs Agency, notorious for its many senior officials known by their criminal nicknames such as "The Penguin" and "Silicon Girl." Looking at summer parliamentary elections, Bulgarians understand that mainline parties profit from corruption and have no real interest in reform. A new party, Leader, the personal project of a shady businessman (unknown five years ago and today the second wealthiest Bulgarian), has a genuine chance to enter parliament. Though formed on the premise that it is more cost effective to own your own party than to pay off other politicians, Leader's clever slogans of protest, populism and nationalism appeal to alienated voters.

17. (C) COMMENT: Sofia is not Bulgaria, so the picture here may be more intense than elsewhere. Nor is cynicism about politicians and government anything new. Bulgarians tend to look outside themselves for hope; many value the abstraction of the EU far above any of their own politicians or institutions. Neither Sofia's streets nor the mutri culture will likely be cleaned up quickly under such conditions. But, high frustration and resignation levels are now mixed with some real anger. If a new government makes a clean-up a priority, it could tap into and motivate citizen support.
END COMMENT.

Karagiannis